

Montgomery council gives the go-ahead to 'science city' plan

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The Montgomery County Council's unanimous approval Tuesday of a plan to spur creation of a \$10 billion, 17.5 million-square-foot center for bioscience research could strengthen county efforts to win support for a new rapid transit system to serve the area.

County officials hope the development, which could be two decades in the making, could position Montgomery as an international center for biosciences that would rival North Carolina's Research Triangle or Palo Alto, Calif. The county is home to almost 300 biotech companies and institutions, including MedImmune, Human Genome Sciences, United Therapeutics, Qiagen, Novavax and Howard Hughes Medical Institute. The project would be built west of Interstate 270 off Shady Grove Road.

"This creates the market and the density that the Corridor Cities Transitway needs," said Montgomery Planning Board Chairman Royce Hanson, whose staff devised much of the plan approved by the council. The "science city" could triple [the number of jobs in the area west of Interstate 270](#) to at least 60,000, many of them high-paying. The development also will include retail and 9,000 housing units.

The transitway would link the Shady Grove Station on Metro's Red Line with the science city and run north, ending a few miles south of Clarksburg.

Without the additional riders, the light-rail line endorsed by the County Council would be too costly to compete for federal money. The allocation of federal transit funds is based largely on whether transit projects save enough passengers enough time to justify the federal investment.

Hanson said it would be three to five years before county residents see big changes in the area, because it takes several years for businesses, academic institutions and government agencies to prepare plans that must then go to the Planning Board for approval before any ground is broken. Although much of the development will not be able to go forward without sufficient transit and road improvements, 4.1 million square feet could be built before the transitway is constructed. There is about 7 million square feet of already developed commercial space in the area.

The project is near [several residential neighborhoods](#), but the area is also home to a number of bioscience companies and Shady Grove Adventist Hospital. The National Institutes of Health recently unveiled plans to build offices nearby for the National Cancer Institute.

"This will ensure that our next generation of brilliant young people can find Montgomery County a place to work and live," said County Council President Nancy Floreen (D-At Large), a key backer of the plan.

Officials from Johns Hopkins University, which could develop up to 6.8 million square feet in the area, praised the move, saying in a statement that the plans provide "the potential for high-paying bioscience and healthcare jobs, new mass transit, high quality affordable housing, parks and other important amenities that will benefit the entire county."

The University of Maryland, one of the nine institutions that are part of the Universities at Shady Grove academic consortium, is also in talks with the county about expanding its presence in the area.

Some [residents remain skeptical](#), saying they worry about the scale of the project and its potential to cause large traffic jams. Council member Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg-Rockville) represents nearby communities. He won support a few weeks ago for reducing the project from a maximum of 20 million square feet to 17.5 million square feet.

The council also agreed to maintain tougher standards for measuring traffic congestion and increased to 40 percent, from 30 percent, the amount of space that must be devoted to life sciences.

Council member Marc Elrich (D-At Large) said that despite voting for the plan, he was skeptical that it would deliver all that is promised. "It will do something," he said. "How much it does remains to be seen."

On Tuesday, County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) traveled to Chicago to encourage leaders of the bioscience industry, who were meeting there, to consider locating in Montgomery.

"This action is a huge boost for the county's ongoing effort to maintain and expand the critical biotechnology work in the county that is saving lives, creating good jobs and strengthening our tax base," he said in a statement.

Peter Greenleaf, president of MedImmune, told the gathering that Montgomery's proximity to federal agencies gives his company a strategic advantage. "It is one of the fastest growing areas in the biosciences sector," he said.

Council member Michael Knapp (D-Upcounty), who chairs the committee that oversees development, said: "This was a lengthy effort and a very good outcome. The vote helps the county attract research and educational institutions and commercial biosciences companies in a highly competitive industry. We had to do something to really up the ante."